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ABSTRACT

Within the Afro-American studies program, the study of African literature is invaluable in demonstrating the relationship between black Americans and Africa; it contributes to the sketchy glimpse of what black culture is and reflects the affective experience of colonialism and neocolonialism. This paper explores the values of an African-literature course for black Americans and focuses on the following goals as important for such a course: demonstration of both the irrelevance of the concept of alienated artist and the compatibility of individual genius with the concept of artist as communal spokesperson, understanding of the character and importance of oral art, introduction to the literature about African literature, and indication of the great variety of modern literature--in many languages and genres--from Africa. The paper concludes with a request that the academic community generate three kinds of materials: more accurate, definitive bibliographies; glossaries for individual works or authors, which explain topical allusions and translate all foreign-language terms; and more nonevaluative, nonsubjective criticism. (JM)

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AFRICAN LITERATURE IN AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAMS OR: TOO MANY INDISPENSABLES

David F. Dorsey, Jr.

By 'Afro-American Studies' I mean here what is, I assume, usually meant: the interdisciplinary study of blacks in the United States. A most remarkable feature of the history of all American intellectual enterprise is that in all disciplines, dicta said to be universally true of mankind, are ignored in discussion of black Americans. The most relevant instance of this curiosity is the slowly disintegrating conviction that the slaves were totally shorn of African culture after they reached these shores; the only instance of absolute cultural divestiture attested in the history of man. The most urgent instance is the vigorous contention that the modern political and economic interests of blacks here are divorced from those of blacks elsewhere. Both these notions are such grotesque fallacies that their existence can be explained only by the cultural needs they serve.

In consequence of the profound and pervasive fallacies about black Americans which prevail in American academe, Afro-American studies programs must devote considerable attention to correcting errors the students have imbibed. This in turn requires that a major subject in the study of American blacks is the significance of blackness, that is Africanity, both in time and in space.

In demonstrating the relationship between black Americans and Africa, African literature is invaluable. Foremost is its assault on parochialism, its introduction to the diversity of black cultures, and to the shared core of vision and values and expression which is black culture over the globe. The literary reflections of religion, dance, and music, for example, all contribute to the sketchy, hazy glimpse of what culture is, and what black culture is. Secondly, and also inevitably, the literature reflects the affective experience of colonialism, and more urgently, neo-colonialism, both its worldwide similarities and its crucial dissimilarities, even within Africa. Occasionally, in addition the literature will show Americans how old is the history of Black American interest and involvement in Africa, and African interest in American blacks.

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Thus African literature, though addressed least of all to a black American audience, nevertheless is a rich mine for veins of cultural continuity, historical association , and current identity of interests.

Some introduction, then, to black culture beyond these shores is a necessity for the Afro-American studies student, and African literature's contribution to that end is a primary function of a course in the subject. I disapprove, however, any course which parades as a course in literature but acts like amateur anthropology. The focus of an African literature course must always be the literature itself, honored as literature, explicated as literature. The focus should be, in a word, literary.

But no study of African literature as literature can escape attention to the experience of blackness in confrontation with the white world. In the first place, in any reading, Americans, including black Americans, will come upon behavior reflecting values incomprehensible to them. Usually the problem is unrecognized; the behavior is blithely misinterpreted or ignored. Frequently the evidence of values which the reader does not comprehend is taken as evidence of flaws in the author's skill. Occasionally the author's society is found at fault. Thus the professor must accept some responsibility for explaining cultural values, even when his end is purely the exegesis of the text.

On the other hand, African texts contain frequent apparent or real evidence of cultural values shared with Afro-Americans, but not with other Americans. These potential instances of cultural continuity require overt discussion in the effort to elucidate the Afro-American's cultural tradition.

Preeminent in this tradition is the stance of artist vis-à-vis his audience and society. Any course in African literature must demonstrate both the irrelevance of the concept of alienated artist, and the compatibility of individual genius with the concept of artist as communal spokesman. Since this understanding is as essential for the proper comprehension of poetic intent in Ishmael Reed as in Paule Marshall or in Ayi Kwei Armah, we have here an instance where the most specific attention to the text (virtually any text!) will elucidate a world-wide principle of black aesthetics.

Another element of the world-wide black tradition which is always reflected or reported in African literature, and which requires objectification in Afro-American studies is the character and importance of orality. Presuming that what I mean by orality is clear to the audience, I will here only distinguish 'reflected' or 'reported'. Although the central intelligence of Achebe's novels occasionally reflects the importance of proverbs in Igbo culture, reflects this by using them, usually he reports their importance by the speech and actions of the characters. In contrast each of p'Bitek's four books with 'Song' in the title is itself, as a whole, a reflection of Acholi oral art. Clearly this is an aspect of explication which a teacher cannot attack with ultimate authority unless he knows the language and the culture from which the work springs. But it is in the essence of the task of all critics and teachers of art to be the less ignorant leading the more ignorant. There are ancillary sources of information about oral art in specific societies; if one is careful not to step beyond the verified it is both possible and necessary to talk about characteristics of the oral art in a language one does not 'know'.

But if the teacher appreciates African literature for itself, and hopes to transmit this respect and pleasure, he must introduce students to the literature about African literature. Here again one confronts certain universals of blackness. Foremost are the ignorance, prejudices and disrespect of critics. We must point out to students the anthologists who modify the poems they print and thereby reveal their ignorance of the poet's subtleties, the bibliographies with grotesque errors and omissions (the most valuable omits the most important poet of Kenya!), the review journals skewed European oriented tastes, European interpretations, or European publishers. More pervasive and significant are the ignorance and prejudices of the critics, contorting, perverting the form and essence of works of art. This problem is most distressing because the critics are usually men of integrity, insight, diligence and genuine interest. Nevertheless the conceptualization of literature still rests too firmly entwined in the literary traditions of Europe, specifically recent Europe. Whereas most criticism of Euro-American literature is merely insignificant, virtually worthless, for African

literature it is often positively misleading and harmful, even in its praises. Who would have supposed in, say, 1970, that a spurious 'universality' and an umbrella 'protest' would still in 1976 be potent shibboleths of the critical canon, or that even now didacticism and social consciousness might be considered inherently detrimental to ~~artistics~~ or irrelevant to artistic achievement? No wonder then that subtle differences in the premises of characterization should escape Euro-centric critics. In what other area of study must the beginner more beware of his mentors?

In addition, any course in African literature addressed to students who may or may not go beyond it, must suggest the infinite variety of modern literature from Africa. It must indicate the multiplicity of languages and genres, and something of the significance of choice of language. All the while it must never allow external evidence, or aesthetic or social or political preconceptions, or even personal prejudice to obscure the individual work, its forms and structure, its overt and implicit meanings, its unique contribution to the corpus of man's art. And given the lack of literary sophistication typical in our students, the course will have to be given over to considerable extent, to teaching fundamentals of reading literature, for example, overcoming the notion that any figurative interpretation of a poem is correct and establishing criteria for correct ones.

In such a long list of indispensable goals, the greatest problem would seem to be one of priorities. Actually the greatest problem I find is time to dispel enough ignorance even to approach the art. Thereafter I fervently favor an approach which makes all else ancillary to the elucidation of specific texts. Ideally my texts are chosen to indicate something of the variety in written English contemporary literature, attempting a geographic, thematic and stylistic spread. The selection is painfully, infuriatingly curtailed by prices and access. Of secondary materials, even the most important must be introduced with time-consuming caveats. If there is any purpose in this public airing of my conception of my duty, it is in asking the academic community to generate materials which assist teachers. Three types come immediately to mind:

1. more accurate, definitive bibliographies, limited in scope but complete, whose annotations and principles of selection are less subjective and more functional
2. glossaries of individual works or of individual authors, which explain to an alien reader all the topical allusions, and translate all terms in foreign languages (including Pidgin), and indicate the connotative and/or denotative meaning of all names when they are significant. (examples of crucial material to be included, details of the Yoruba pantheon for The Interpreters, details of Nairobi streets and quarters for Kill Me Quick)
3. more exegetical (non-evaluative, non-subjective) criticism, demeaning perhaps to the cognoscenti, but indispensable to the neophyte. (examples: the forms and functions of rhyme in Lenri Peters; the manipulation of time in Grain of Wheat; the pathetic fallacy in The Victims)

It will be claar that I have been thinking not only of the program of Afro-American studies in which I teach African literature, but also of the students I teach, who are almost exclusively blacks from Africa and the United States. But all that I have said will, I hope, be found applicable, mutatis mutandis, to other American students. As I have conceived the place of African literature in Afro-American studies, the status of the student is critical. When students are already a little or much informed about Africa, much more can be achieved in the refinement of their literary acumen. When they are already intuitively familiar with black culture, much can be achieved in the objectification of their own cultural values. This implies that African literature courses in black schools should differ from courses of the same material in white schools. Only in America could it need saying that teaching black people their relation to other blacks and to blackness is a serious contribution to the nourishment of Truth.